

Facts & Information

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How to satisfy your local calling needs

Your local phone service allows you to make toll-free calls within a predetermined area. Generally, the larger the local calling area, the fewer toll calls you have to make. The size of the local calling area depends on where you live and who provides your service. Most Washington households can make basic calls without incurring a toll charge. But since each person is different, you might not be satisfied with your local calling area.

In the last 10 years, the UTC completed two comprehensive reviews of the state's local calling areas. The reviews resulted in most Washingtonians receiving larger local calling areas. However, the UTC does not plan on conducting another review. The commission's policy is to rely on competition and other options to meet individual customer calling needs. Larger calling areas will be mandated only under the most exceptional circumstances.

This factsheet will help you: review your community's local calling area; identify your options in meeting your local calling needs; understand why mandated larger calling areas in the future will be rare and, determine whether and how to initiate a complaint with the UTC requesting a larger local calling area.

Reviewing your local calling area

When reviewing your local calling area, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you and your neighbors have to make toll calls to reach your children's schools?
- Are city or town services outside your local calling area?
- Can you reach fire, police, medical and other emergency services with a local call?
- Does your local calling area include a commercial center?

These questions outline what the UTC considers to be the basic calling needs of a household. If you answer "no" to one or more of these questions, look into whether the "no" applies to only a handful of people or more broadly through your community. For instance, you might need to make a toll call to your preferred physician or your favorite store but others in your community might use health care facilities and businesses located within the local calling area.

A review of your local calling area should help you identify specifically why you believe your local calling area is not meeting your needs. You should also have an idea of whether your problem is your own or shared by others in your community. This information will help you when pursuing possible solutions.



P.O. Box 47250
1300 S. Evergreen Park Dr SW
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

Local: (360)664-1160
Toll Free: 800-562-6150
TTY: (360)586-8203

Web site: www.wutc.wa.gov
Email: info@wutc.wa.gov

All UTC publications are
available in alternate formats.
Call (360)664-1133.

Alternatives to expanding your local calling area

The UTC will only consider a request to expand local calling when all reasonable alternatives have been exhausted. The following options represent the minimum you should consider:

- **Toll calling packages.** Long-distance rates, especially for in-state long-distance calls, have declined dramatically in recent years. If high toll bills are a problem for you, it makes sense to get a better deal on your long-distance service. As a benchmark, you should be paying no more than 10 cents a minute for most calls and many companies offer rates that are even lower. (Ask for our fact sheet on selecting a long-distance company)
- **Work with your local telephone company.** Your phone company, if it sees a need, may tailor local calling services to better meet your requirements. For instance, it may offer an optional local calling plan that may cost you more per month but allow you a larger toll-free calling zone. *If you are thinking of filing a complaint with the UTC about your local calling area, you will have to document that your local telephone company has refused to voluntarily provide a reasonable solution to your calling needs.* Get the company's response in writing.
- **Alternative providers.** Depending on your situation, wireless phone service can help you meet your local calling needs. Wireless companies offer a wide variety of calling packages, including packages with free toll or large local calling areas. Wireless service might not be economical as a replacement to your traditional phone service. But if you are considering adding a second line or acquiring a mobile phone for other reasons, you should look at whether wireless telephone service would help to meet your calling needs.
- **Site specific solutions.** You should consider local calling access as a factor when shopping for products & services. Encourage your Internet access provider or health care provider to acquire a toll-free line. Another solution, though expensive, is a foreign exchange line which will connect your phone into a neighboring calling area.

Why expanding local calling areas is the last option

Larger local calling areas can make it harder for customers to benefit from competition.

When calling areas are expanded, the local telephone company replaces the lost toll income by raising other rates, usually the flat-monthly rate that everyone pays. Customers who make lots of toll calls pay less while those who do not end up paying more. But in the long-run, all customers suffer.

Competition is driving down prices for toll calls, wireless phones and other alternatives. In contrast, you still have only one choice for local residential phone service. Paying more for a monopoly service so you can buy less of a service that is competitive and declining in price makes sense only in the most exceptional circumstances. That is why the UTC considers mandating larger calling areas only as a last resort.

Filing a complaint for a larger calling area

If your local telephone company has refused to expand local calling or offer other local calling options and you believe your circumstances are exceptional enough to justify a mandated larger calling area, you could file a complaint with the UTC against your local company.

Formal complaints are legal documents though they do not have to be prepared by an attorney. Your complaint should be clear and accurate. Your facts should demonstrate the exceptional circumstances that justify a larger local calling area. You should include copies of any relevant correspondence, including any responses from your local telephone company to your specific request for larger calling areas and local calling option plans. Your name and address and the name and address of your attorney, if you employ one, must be on the complaint.

You should acquaint yourself with the UTC rule governing local calling areas (see next section) as well as any other relevant statutes or UTC rules. The legal rules covering formal complaints can be found in RCW 80.04.110 and Chapter 480-09 WAC. Other provisions of law may also be relevant to your complaint.

Even though an attorney is not required to file a complaint, you may wish to consult legal counsel to ensure you have considered all options available to you. If not represented by an attorney, you must include a statement that the document (pleading) is true and correct to the best of the signer's belief. UTC staff are not allowed to provide legal advice to the public.

The commission must issue a final decision on a complaint within 10 months of it being filed. Depending on the type of complaint and evidentiary needs, a hearing may be scheduled.

UTC rules governing local calling areas

WAC 480-120-045 Local calling areas. (1) The commission may expand local calling areas only under the most exceptional circumstances. The commission will generally rely on long distance competition, local competition, and optional calling plans that assess additional charges only to participating customers to meet customer demand for alternate or expanded calling.

(2) In evaluating requests for expanded local calling, the commission will consider whether the local calling area is adequate to allow customers to call and receive calls from the following community services: Community medical facilities, police and fire departments, city or town governments, elementary and secondary schools, libraries, and a commercial center. In evaluating such requests, the commission will consider the overall community of interest of the entire exchange, and may consider other pertinent factors such as customer calling patterns, the availability and feasibility of optional calling plans, and the level of local and long distance competition.

(3) Requests for expanded local calling areas shall be made pursuant to RCW 80.04.110 (the commission's complaint statute).